EXHIBITION
OF
CONTEMPORARY ART OF
SOVIET RUSSIA

GRAND CENTRAL PALACE
NEW YORK, FEBRUARY, 1929

A. I. KRAVCHENKO: Harvest

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OF
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OF
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Painting Graphic Sculpture

FOREWORD BY

CHRISTIAN BRINTON

INTRODUCTION BY

P. NOVITSKY

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GRAND CENTRAL PALACE

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY, 1929

EKATERINA ZERNOVA: The Giant's Stride

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FOREWORD

By Christian Brinton

BORNE across wide spaces and wintry seas, and set down as by magic in our midst, the exhibition of soviet Russian art at the Grand Central Palace fulfills a twofold function. One is intensive, the other extensive. First of all, the collection in itself constitutes a concrete expression of aesthetic activity as it flourishes to-day in the U.S.S.R. Secondly, it convincingly discloses to the outside world what is being accomplished by the representative artists of a state that has but lately celebrated its decennial.

Not the least appeal made by this notable ensemble of contemporary soviet painting, graphic art, and sculpture now on view in this country, is that it belongs strictly to its own time and its own day. Patient researches by the conscientious cataloguer have failed to unearth scarcely an object that dates from more than a round dozen years back. You here see Russian art not as it was, but as it actually is, and as it may possibly be for a brief space hence. And yet, not for long, since the distinctive characteristic of Slavic cultural expression is that it is essentially a part of that aspiring social organism which in itself is subject to constant change.

Following the pulsing social rhythm of the day, soviet art is at present rejoicing in its new-found freedom. Though by no means all the aesthetic cargo of the past has been jettisoned, the

general direction of the course of development points forward and upward. You will find upon these walls little to remind you of pre-revolutionary Russian art. Here is no hint of the sultry splendours of the Ballet russe. You will here not inhale the exotic perfume of that St. Petersburg dilettantism which lingered flowerlike upon the brink of an abyss. Fresh, virile forces in the main replace those that were engulfed in the greatest cataclysm of the modern world.

Stroll through the rooms and you will meet new names, and make new acquaintances. You will above all scarcely fail to react to the tonic, invigorating spirit of the collection taken as a whole. Cézannism, which has proved the bane of the modern art world, as likewise the bare, blighting abstractions of cubist are mercifully infrequent. In their place has sprung into being an art that at once takes something more from nature, and gives more in return.

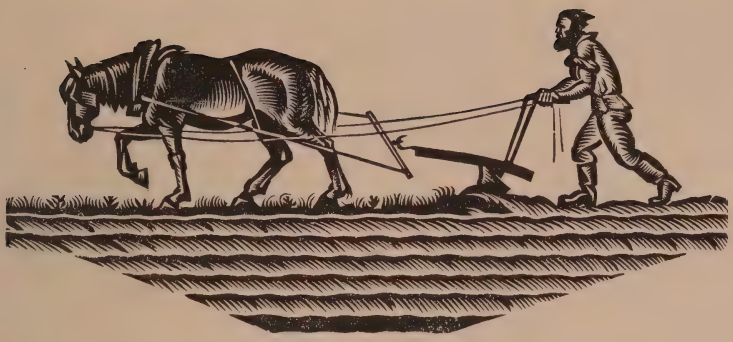
Whilst offering a judicious cross-section of current soviet artistic activity, with due representation accorded to right, left and centre, the exhibition is clearly dominated by two strongly defined personalities. The first is Sterenberg, the second Pimenov. To these may be added a third, a gifted young individual who disports the readily pronounceable Slavic patronym of Peter Williams. Sterenberg composes spatially in pure flat tints with a decided eye for decorative pattern. Pimenov is a master of plastic rhythm, and Williams adds wit and character to a novel sense of placement. The older men of advanced persuasion such as Altman, Lentulov, Falk, Kuprin, and Tatlin have been appropriately reinforced by such vital, spirited talents as Goncharov, Vialov, and Labas, the latter of whom contributes a group of immensely diverting airplane studies. Apart from the others, though allied to his fellow neo-orientalist Saryan, stands Paul Kusnietzov whose serenely luminous and monumental canvases depicting South Russian life and scene form an outstanding feature of the ensemble. Finally, our brief résumé of the more progressive tendencies would be lacking in gallantry, as well as completeness, without due reference to the two women painters, Olga Bebutova and Ekaterina Zernova, the one somewhat imbued with Parisian practice, the other possessing a vision as fresh and autonomous as her own far-off Siberian habitat.

Yet not only does the exhibition disclose new personalities, but something of the stir and stimulus of the general social and aesthetic readjustment is reflected in the work of even such established masters as Grabar, Konchalovsky, and the painter of lusty peasant types, A. E. Arkhipov. Turn where you may, you will envisage the same, free, unfettered outlook upon nature and upon life. And not less is this so in painting, than in sculpture and in the graphic arts section. The sculpture in particular should prove something of a revelation to those not hitherto familiar with recent artistic developments in U.S.S.R. For plastic energy and sure feeling for the possibilities of the medium Vera Sandomirskaya's work in wood affords a sheer, elemental joy as rare as it is salutary.

It is not, however, within the province of cataloguer and apologist further to descant upon the artistic features of the exhibition, or the actual state of art in Soviet Russia. For that task my esteemed confrère, Mr. P. Novitsky, is far better qualified than I, a mere appreciative visitor. He has taken active part in that vast, inspiring programme of social and artistic stabilization the first fruits of which have herewith been brought to us by Amtorg. As to the actual composition of the exhibition, it was undertaken by the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, of U.S.S.R.

Glance at the characteristic little head and tailpieces that enliven the several contributions to these pages. They eloquently indicate their authors' respective functions. To Mr. Novitsky I concede the sober task of, so to speak, ploughing and sawing wood. It has been my modest mission to put the house in order for our guests. And now I may go out and harken to that song of hope which, from all hearts, rises perennially to the sky—

A. A. DEYNEKA: Two Women



Pictorial Art in U.S.S.R.

During the Ten Years of the Revolution

Its Tendencies and Achievements

By P. Novitsky

DURING the first years of the revolution, the dictatorship of art, through the relentless logic of circumstance, passed into the hands of the so-called left-wing artists. The members of this group were enemies of traditions and canons, of the academic and the eclectic. They were experimentalists, innovators, inventors. They were the artistic representatives of the radical intelligentsia of the day. Without any internal tragedies, waverings, or doubts, they offered their services to the proletarian powers during the first period of the revolution and threw themselves into the task of cultural reconstruction with enthusiasm and with strength. The left group was divided according to several different tendencies which may be said to have sprung from two main sources. Some were fantastists, utopians, creators of purely theoretical systems, experimentalists in the laboratory of abstract aesthetic forms and formulae. They were non-subjectivists and analysts, the Russian variety of cubists. At their head was K. S. Malevich. Their theorist, exponent and ideologist was the talented art critic, N. N. Punin. The laboratory of their analytical and creative work was, at first, The Museum of Painting Culture and, later, The Institute of Artistic Culture at Leningrad.

The other tendency was constructivism. Its supporters are the most fervid apostles of the industrial art and artistic organization of the new order. They developed a whole group of brilliant masters in the field of polygraphy, textiles, wood-carving, and the printing industries. Their pupils and followers lead and direct all the original work issued by the workers' circles and clubs. They furnished the finest artists to the cinema industry, such as Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein. They created a great practical movement and an artistically ideologic spirit in contemporary architecture. They gave the innovationist, revolutionary theatre a new, materialistic, concrete form to its stage productions which was epoch-making in the history of the theatre. They encouraged the art of posters and advertising and the art of photography. Finally they were the first to face the problem of organizing mass groups, parades, demonstrations, revolutionary festivals and pageants. They appealed to the masses, not theoretically, not on a formal, ideologic plane, but technically and creatively.

The first specific period of soviet pictorial art was the art period of the civil war, the period of agitational art. This comprises the year 1918–1924, six years of struggle and work. It is the fashion to underrate the achievements of this period, but that is a myopic point of view. In reality it was one of the most productive and creative of periods, and one out of which sprang the mighty art movements of our day. It is true, the artists were hungry. It is true that for the time being painting ceased to develop and even the art of printing fell into neglect. Yet despite this there came into being during this stressful period the art of the agitational and industrial poster, the art of political caricature, the art of book illustration, and there arose also the decorative conception of the art of mass pageants, and there flourished as never before the art of the scenic director and designer. The poster in particular became widely used and was transformed into a clearly defined artistic medium, achieving its own significant style. Necessarily its field was limited, though this branch of pictorial art played a most important role in the subsequent development of soviet graphic arts and caricature. The outstanding master in the field of the political poster is D. Moor whose quick, spirited, merciless drawings even yet disturb both camps in U.S.S.R. Excellent artists of the indus-

trial and cinema posters are the brothers, V. and G. Stenberg, whilst V. Lebedev is a master fully understanding the mission and function of posters and one capable of raising them to the heights of truly great art.

The graphic arts, highly developed even before the revolution, have flourished with unusual brilliance during the revolutionary epoch. Here almost all the best traditions of the art are preserved. Here one notes the transition from poster to political caricature, from the academic art of the old graphic artists to the art of book and magazine illustration, and to the arts of bookmaking and polygraphy in general. Outstanding in this field are I. N. Pavlov, V. L. Favilev, D. I. Mitrokhin, and V. P. Belkin. During these years the creative abilities and craftsmanship of our most important graphic artists came to maturity, *viz.*, V. A. Favorsky, A. I. Kravchenko, and D. P. Sterenberg. These years also brought forward in the role of first-class draughtsmen such men as N. N. Kupreanov, P. V. Maturin, L. A. Bruni, and K. Konashevich. It is also necessary to mention here two brilliant masters of graphic portraiture—N. Altman, an artist who has done a great deal for the theatre, and U. Annenkov.

Speaking of the achievements of soviet pictorial art during the first years of the revolution, it is necessary to emphasize especially the success of theatrical constructivism. At present even the more conservative theatres have undergone a transition from flat decorations to those of a constructivist, engineering-architectural type. Instead of the painted, flat decoration having a constraining character and hiding the movements of the actor, the artist built a scene each part of which has a utilitarian significance, leaving open to view the movements of the actor. The principle of pure decoration is out of date. The scene in the new theatre is not decorated, it is built by an artist-constructionist so that each object and each set facilitate the movements and the plastic play of the actor. Thus a special type of theatrical artists was created, not a painter but rather an architect, a scenic constructor. The brilliant days in this field were those which marked the evolution of the modern stage in the theatre of V. V. Meierhold under the artists, L. Popov, V. Stepanov, and E. Shiplyakov. From thence these constructionist stage sets were introduced into virtually all the other theatres.

The second period of soviet pictorial art began in 1924–25. It is characterized by the restoration of the old and the introduction of new groups in the arts, a concrete process of disintegration followed by the formation of various art societies, the attempts of the printing arts to become essential to life and to the revolution, and to discover art forms that should be directly related to the new social forms. At the same time was continued the process of adapting and utilizing different artists in various branches of industry and the training of a new type of artist, namely, the industrial engineer and organizer.

The largest and most important of these organizations is AKHRR, The Society of Artists of Revolutionary Russia. At first this association comprised the modest type of painters who had decided to portray, truthfully and realistically, the revolution and the reality of the workers' world. Essentially they were conscientious epigonists of the transition period, never going beyond the artistic formulae, traditions, and understanding of the problems of pictorial art of their teachers. Everything served as a theme, and conscientiously they set to work depicting and recording contemporary events as they saw and understood them. Minute descriptiveness, story-telling, the transcription of partial, isolated facts, literary illustrations for text-books, "politgramat"—further than this the founders of AKHRR did not progress. Among the most typical and sincere exponents of this tendency are V. Karev, S. Karpov, N. Nikonov, and P. Radimov. But it was not these modest painters who made the fame and success of AKHRR. This success is explained by the concise art programme formulated by AKHRR, the striving of the majority of artists towards widely organized forms adapted to the co-ordination of their professional work with the needs of the proletarian state and society, and reactions against non-subjectivity and abstractions in art. In '25 AKHRR scored a colossal success in membership extension. The great mass of artists joined it. AKHRR now included within its ranks retrospectivists, impressionists, Cézannists. But AKHRR in the process lost some of its characteristic artistic tendencies and became a huge professional union of city and, mainly, provincial artists who rallied around the watchword of the social function of art.

The thematic exhibition of AKHRR in 1926, Life and Habits

of the Peoples of U.S.S.R., did not augment in prestige illustrative ethnography nor the depicting of local customs and environmental conditions. It was a grandiose demonstration of the contemporary artistic conflict and medley. Moreover, not everything that was significant or interesting at that exhibition belonged to AKHRR but to those who had come from other groups and societies: from The Union of Russian Artists (K. Yuon, A. Arkhipov); from The World of Art (B. Kustodiev, E. Lanserey); from The Knave of Diamonds (R. Falk, V. Rojdestvensky, V. Federov). In 1927 AKHRR disintegrated; the whole group from The Knave of Diamonds left it and many other artists as well. AKHRR lost the character of a professional union of soviet artists and assumed a more general aspect of artistic uniformity. Nevertheless in spite of the relatively slight artistic significance of AKHRR, and in spite of the fact that it has not created any distinctively revolutionary style, its services to soviet art have been very great.

First of all AKHRR turned to the masses and correspondingly made the masses interested in pictorial art. Secondly AKHRR brought into the immense art movement of the day virtually the entire band of professional artists and inspired them to become alive to the questions of political life and struggle. Thirdly AKHRR initiated the programme of utilizing pictorial art in contemporary life and social activity. Fourthly AKHRR placed the problem of the picture before that of the purely graphic arts. In spite of all the pretensions and failures of AKHRR, these were great services to the cause of art in the U.S.S.R. They are essentially the problems shared by all art. They can be solved, not by theories and manifestos, but solely by the high quality of artistic production and the genuine service of art to the community.

The fate of The Knave of Diamonds is interesting. There was a time when the artists of this group brought to Russian painting a refreshing stream of sincerity and clarity, and boldly broke down the false mannerism of academic routine and the romantic detachment of the retrospectivist. Even their individualistic tendencies and bold technique were of use in their time. But the revolution demanded something greater of them and they endeavoured to meet it. In 1925 they changed their romantic

name and became simply, Moscow Painters. Their manifestos bore witness to their sincere desire to become the depictors of the greatest revolution of the epoch. But they were unable to give this epoch anything save an already demoded craftsmanship. Thus they remained in the old position of Cézannism, poets of landscape, isolated from the life of the people, powerless to look at life and serve it afresh with youthful strength. Some of them went to AKHRR and there maintained their former positions; the others formed a new group called Bitiya. To join the AKHRR went R. R. Falk, B. Rojdestvensky, E. E. Mashkov, A. V. Lentulov, and V. V. Federov, and to the other group went the younger men, who had already gone through the school of The Knave of Diamonds. At their head were A. A. Osmerkin, and A. V. Kuprin. The older representatives of The Knave of Diamonds are among the strongest and best painters of the epoch, the mentors and teachers of the younger painters. The most significant and profound master of this school is R. R. Falk. He skilfully and in interesting fashion solves the formal problems of landscape painting and still life and devotes a great deal of time to the field of portraiture. A. Kuprin shows mature craftsmanship and a penetrating understanding of nature in his various landscapes and still life compositions. Finally P. P. Konchalovsky has revealed a splendid maturity of talent, boundless artistic temperament, a sharp and vivid joy in his latest works, and in 1926, on entering Bitiya he became the leader of the group. All these first-class masters with European reputations present in themselves great cultural richness, but certain of them have remained stationary as to the forms and tenets of their art. In 1927 Bitiya was divided. Out of it came Krilo (Wing), a group of artists at whose head is A. A. Osmerkin. Makovetz is a society formed by different artists foreign to one another who came together for reasons of actual necessity during the first years of the revolution. In this group are such artists as A. V. Shveshenko, an interesting artist of the impressionist school, and several fine draughtsmen, among them being L. A. Bruni, S. V. Perasimov, and M. S. Rodinov.

As an outpost of the new academic aestheticism there is a society of artists which is called The Four Arts. The strongest element in it are the graphic artists, V. A. Favorsky with his

pupils, A. I. Kravchenko and others. In spite of its name this is more a union of academic graphic artists who have been joined by a few academic painters who have evinced the tendency towards monumental, decorative fresco painting—such as P. V. Kusnietzov, M. Saryan, and K. S. Petrov-Vodkin. One of the means of escape from the narrow confines of academic painting is by way of the renaissance of monumental murals. In this respect the tendencies of the artists of The Four Arts are highly characteristic. If to the special leanings towards the goal of the AKHRR there were to be united a true artistic culture and a serious search for new forms, for a genuinely monumental style, we then must mention OST, an organization embracing various groups of the younger artists, graphic and otherwise. This is a union of the more live and talented younger artists who have gone through the school of cubism and who are independently refashioning the influence of the post-impressionist manner. They are able to pass from analytical a-formity to contemporary subject and specific form. Their strivings may be summed up in the transference to painting of the principles of the graphic method of solving problems and to attempts to attain broad monumentality of style. Although they obviously call themselves painters, their characteristic trait is the striving towards poster-like effects, to book illustration, and to the creation of drawings and mural decorations.

There are genuine talents in OST. At their head and standing above all is D. P. Sterenberg, an original spirit, a genuine master, a virtuoso, the most gifted among the artists of U.S.S.R. In the past few years he has also shown himself a master of engraving. OST introduced a group of talented young artists numbering P. Williams, A. Leynek, N. Denisovsky, A. Labas, U. Pimenov, A. Tishler. OST is the only organization of artists which has actually trained contemporary masters, and bids fair to maintain its position as a living and healthy organization of the artists of U.S.S.R. We thus have at present four artistic tendencies or schools: Naturalism, AKHRR; Cézannist impressionism, the late Knave of Diamonds; academic monumentalism, The Four Arts; and soviet post-impressionism, OST. The process of disintegration and reformation thus reveals healthy tendencies towards a unity of artistic aim and effort.

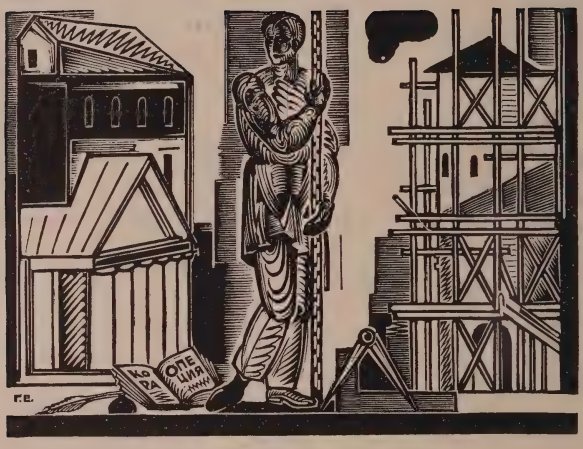
In 1925 there was formed ORS—Organization of Russian Sculptors. Two exhibitions of ORS, 1926 and 1927, showed that, since the revolution, in spite of the shortage and high cost of materials, Russian sculpture has not only not lowered its high artistic standards but has actually forged ahead. The basic tendency of Russian soviet sculpture is towards the monumental and the industrial. We already have in this field splendid achievements to our credit. Although the titanic task before us has scarcely begun, yet we are completely ready for it. We have first-class works by such masters as A. T. Matveev, V. Ellonen, V. N. Domogapki, and E. M. Chaikov. We have strong and youthful personalities in Fritsch-Khar, Tsaplin, and Sandomirskaya. Soviet sculpture by its achievements and tendencies is rapidly following on the heels of the progress made by the soviet graphic arts.

Soviet Russia is young. Its culture is fresh and virile. We are capable of erecting a significant and inspiring cultural structure. Nowhere are questions of theory and practice so broadly and earnestly put to the test, nowhere do they attract such concentrated attention of specialists and of the great mass of the public as in the Soviet Union. The revolutionary renaissance of art, not infrequently characterized in the Occident by narrow technique and formal, soul-killing virtuosity, is in U.S.S.R. not merely an empty motto, but a genuine programme of action.

CATALOGUE

PAINTING GRAPHIC ART

SCULPTURE


ЭПЕ
ЦИЯ

CATALOGUE

PAINTING

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3 Petrocommune

ARAKHELYAN, SEDRAK

4 Threshing

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23 Blue Water

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24 Kaluga
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152 Portrait

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158 Peasant

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K. VIALOV: The Start

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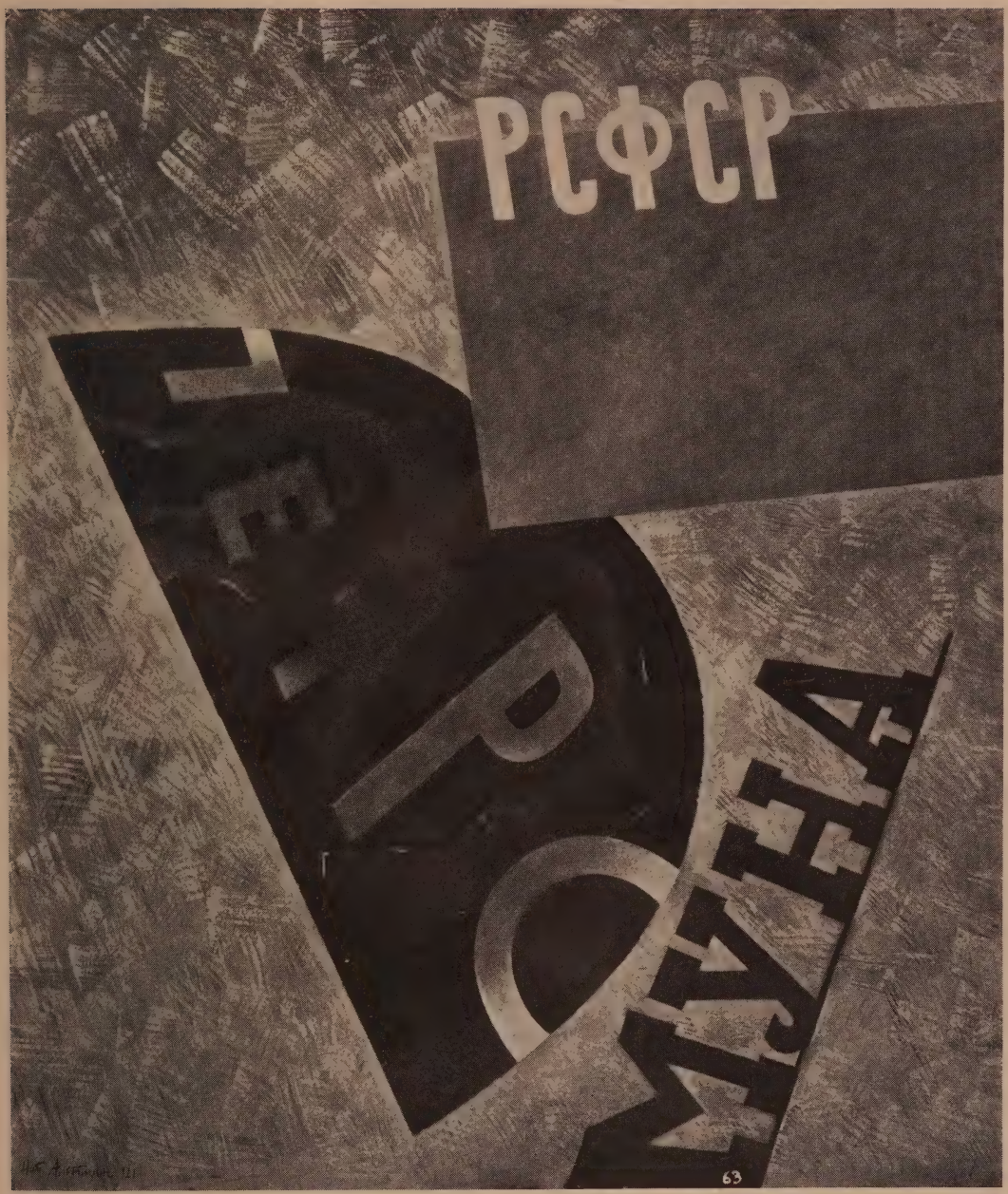
U. PIMENOV: Tennis

A. GONCHAROV: Portrait of M. Grausner

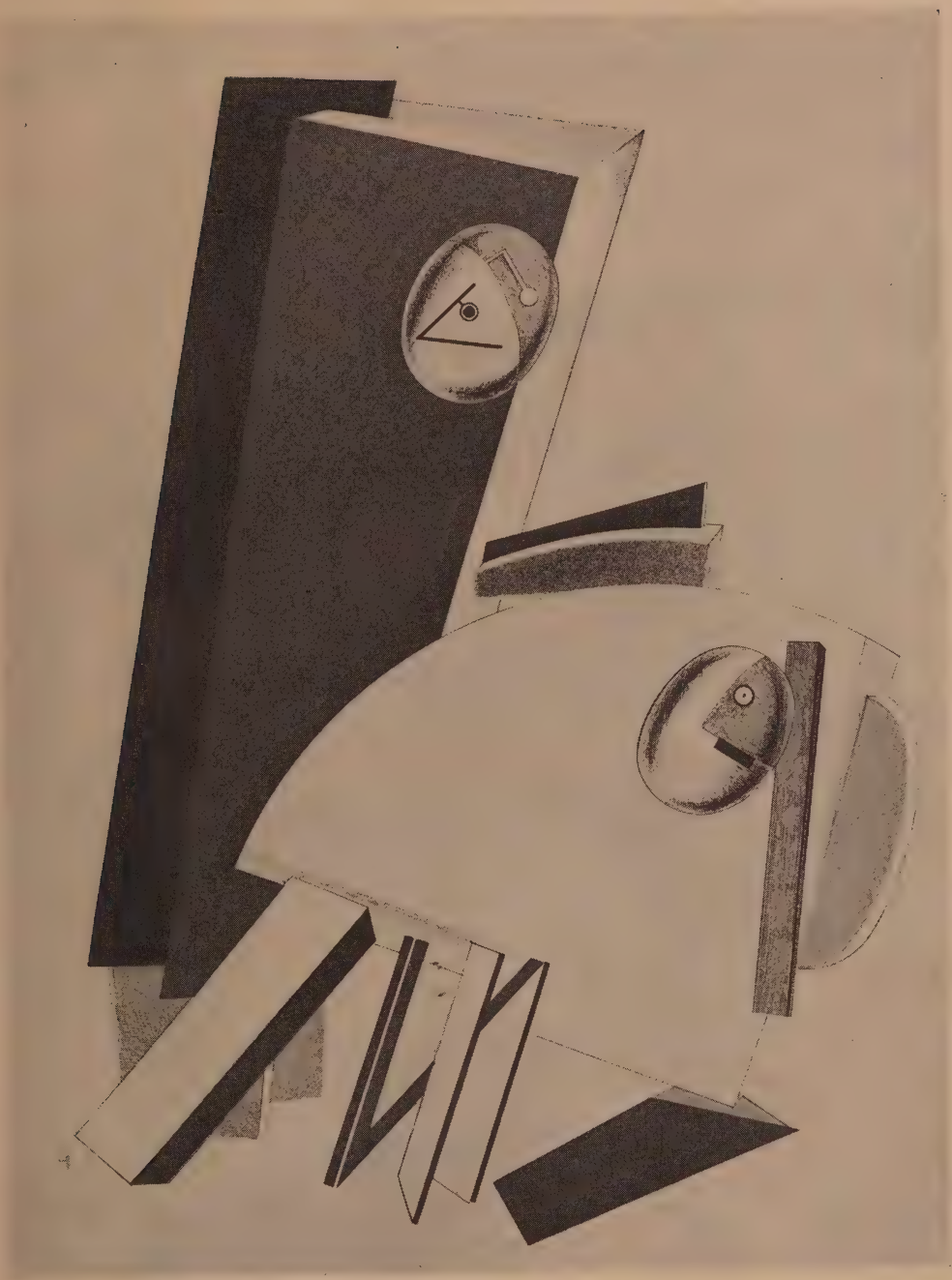
PETER WILLIAMS: Portrait of an Actor

A. N. KOZLOV: Revolutionary Uprising



NATHAN ALTMAN: Petrocommune

DAVID STERENBERG: Beggars



L. LISSITZKY: Cowards

JULYA OBOLENSKAYA: Camel

E. KAPINOV: Vera Finger

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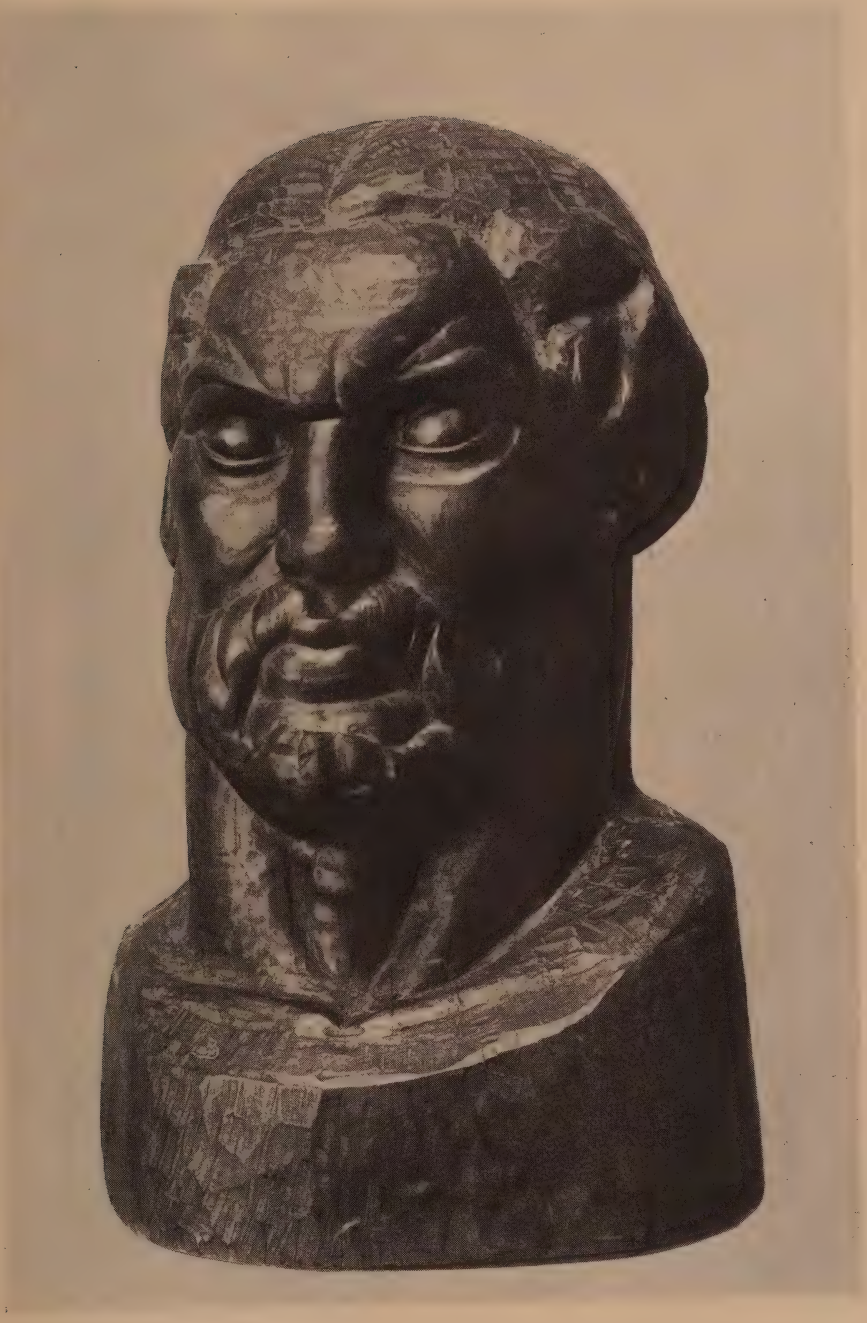

VERA SANDOMIRSKAYA: Stenka Razin

B. KOROLOV: Peasant Woman

S. BULAKOVSKY: Woman with Jar

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